

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
Of
VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Submitted

By

Sandra A. Miller
Chair
Vietnam Veterans of America
Homeless Task Force

Before the
House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health

Regarding

The Status of Homeless-Assistance Programs for Veterans Conducted by the
Department of Veterans Affairs, including its Coordination with Community-
Based providers and Other Agencies

May 6, 2003

Mr. Chairman, and members of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health, my name is Sandra A. Miller, I served as a Senior Enlisted Woman in the U.S. Navy from 1975 until 1981 and am currently Chairwoman of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Task Force on Homeless Veterans. I work with homeless veterans as the daily Program Coordinator of a transitional Residence, one of the many programs provided by The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center. Our transitional residence receives funding from the Department of Veterans Affairs Homeless Grant and Per Diem Program (HGPD) and operates under a Shared Lease Agreement on the grounds of the Coatesville VA Medical Center.

On behalf of VVA, I thank you and your colleagues for this opportunity to submit testimony sharing our views on the status of homeless assistance programs for veterans conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), including its coordination with community-based providers and other agencies.

VVA has long been a proponent of both Public Law 105-368 (The Pilot Programs for VA Guaranteed Loans for Multifamily Transitional Housing for Homeless Veterans) and Public Law 107-95 (The Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001). The two laws cited above provide distinctive and innovative methods in addressing homelessness among veterans. However, without full and complete funding, set aside as a separate line item in the budget, neither will achieve full success.

The President has stated he wants to end chronic homelessness within 10 years. A commitment must be made and dollars must be allocated if the goal to end homelessness is ever to be achieved.

In Public Law 107-95, the Sense of Congress states:

- “(1) homelessness is a significant problem in the veterans community and veterans are disproportionately represented among homeless men;
- (2) while many effective programs assist homeless veterans to again become productive and self-sufficient members of society, current resources provided to such programs and other activities that assist homeless veterans are inadequate to provide all needed essential services, assistance, and support to homeless veterans;
- (3) the most effective programs for the assistance of homeless veterans should be identified and expanded;
- (4) federally funded programs for homeless veterans should be held accountable for achieving clearly defined results;
- (5) Federal efforts to assist homeless veterans should include prevention of homelessness; and
- (6) Federal agencies, particularly the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Labor, should cooperate more fully to address the problem of homelessness among veterans.”

FUNDING FOR P.L. 105-368 & P.L. 107-95

VVA believes the VA is long overdue in implementing Section 601 of P.L. 105-368. It has always been VVA's understanding that this program was to provide a housing option for a period longer than two (2) years, the average length of time a homeless veteran spends in a traditional transitional living arrangement. The intent, as VVA understands it, is to provide long-term housing options. VVA continues to object to language in the FY04 budget that would move this program from a loan program to a grant program and, in the process, change it from mandatory to discretionary funding. This alteration would change the original intent of the statute, which is to infuse private capital into the effort to solve the problem.

P.L. 107-95 is landmark legislation, passed by a bipartisan basis by Congress, to assist this nation's more than 250,000 homeless veterans. VVA applauds the increased VA budget funding request that is being considered.

However, with that said, presently VVA seeks \$75 million to be made available in the Department of Veterans Affairs FY04 budget for the VA HGPS Program. We further ask that funding for all VA homeless programs be protected, for without protection these dollars stand exposed, vulnerable and may not meet their target. VVA does believe all VA health care dollars should be mandatory, not discretionary.

VVA also continues to urge full funding to the authorized level of \$50 million for the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) administered by the Department of Labor (DoL). This training and employment initiative has proven to be a cost-effective program. Only through re-training can we expect to place many of the homeless veterans in the employment market. Without re-training and employment, many of these veterans will not be able to regain a sense of self-worth, purpose and direction.

If the sense of Congress is to be met, VVA must ask for full funding of P.L. 105-368 and P.L. 107-95. Without full funding, achieving the sense of Congress cannot be met.

INTERAGENCY COUNCIL ON HOMELESS

The establishment of the Presidential Interagency Council on the Homeless (ICH) was a welcomed event at the federal level. Those of us who anticipate enhanced communication and cooperation between federal agencies are waiting and watching for tangible evidence that interagency cooperation is, in fact, happening. We are hopeful that its most recent grant proposal, combining the efforts of the VA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), will produce strong homeless programs in the community.

The ICH Request for Funding Proposal (RFP) is a massive document and for most non-profit agencies, especially small local community providers, an award from this grant is far from their reach. This is unfortunate if it was intended to be utilized by those other than very large agencies and municipalities. It was also disappointing that portions of the grant specific to

agencies could not provide funding unless all three agency components were contained in the grant. An additional aspect of the HUD portion of this ICH proposal, as with HUD's annual McKinney – Vento Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA), dollars for transitional housing are essentially non-existent. Not only does VVA feel that there still exists a need for transitional housing, VVA recognizes the fact that HUD dollars are unobtainable as leveraging or enhancement funding to VA HGPS awards. The problem lies in fact that the VA homeless residential funding can only be for transitional housing.

VA HOMELESS GRANT & PER DIEM PROGRAM

The Department of Veterans Affairs Homeless Grant & Per Diem Program has been in existence since 1994. Since then, thousands of homeless veterans have availed themselves of the programs provided by community-based service providers. In some areas of this country the VA and community-based service providers work successfully in a collaborative effort to actively address homelessness among veterans. The community-based service providers are able to supply much needed services in a cost-effective and efficient manner. The VA recognizes this and encourages residential and service center programs in areas where homeless veterans would most benefit. The VA HGPS program offers funding in a highly competitive grant round. Because financial resources available to HGPS are limited, the number of grants awarded and the dollars granted are restrictive and hence many geographic areas in need suffer a loss that HGPS could address.

Since 1994, 306 grants have been awarded by program. These 306 grantees have provided more than 5,700 beds for homeless veterans. It is perplexing to those who have been a part of this grant program how dollars to cover the per diem portion of the program will be available in the future if increases to this portion of the program are not incrementally increased through time based on the number grants awarded.

VA HGPS PER DIEM ONLY GRANTS

Another component of the HGPS program is the award of Per Diem Only (PDO) grants. These grants do not contain any "bricks and mortar" dollars. The PDO grants must be renewed on a regular basis (currently, every three years). These renewals are not based on program outcomes or efficiencies. Renewal grants are pooled together, forcing existing, proven programs to compete with new, unproven conceptual programs. VVA suggests that PDO renewal grants be judged separately, on their merit and proven record of success.

SHARED LEASE AGREEMENTS

Some of the HGPSD recipient programs have entered into Shared Lease Agreements with local VA Medical Centers, utilizing dormant, unoccupied space. The non-profit agency, for which I work, has taken advantage of this opportunity. We have a very good working relationship with the Coatesville VA Medical Center. It is a cooperative venture.

The strength of the VA – non-profit relationship is unique to each medical center and agency. Each must have a clear understanding of the services and assistance they can lend to each other to enhance local homeless veteran programs. VVA recognizes that a strong foundation between the VA and the non-profit collaboration brings greater resources to solving homeless veteran issues in their local community. The issue of shared lease agreements, however, does require attention. There is no uniform policy in the contractual VA Memorandums of Agreement leasing fees that community-based service providers pay for use of vacant VA spaces. The amounts range across a wide spectrum. Some pay much more than others. This is an inequitable procedure and requires immediate address for remedy. There needs to be a standard, set calculation, with built-in geographic considerations, on amounts community-based service providers pay for usage of otherwise vacant or unused facilities. This policy must also be driven, not entirely by money: the mission must be calculated into the equation. For many of the community-based service providers who are small non-profit agencies, this uniform calculation would provide additional funds to be utilized in the direct provision of services to homeless veterans. As determined by the VA's own calculations for per diem eligibility, non-profits can only obtain per diem equal to, but not in excess of, the cost of the program. Non-profits don't get rich off VA per diem dollars.

HOMELESS WOMEN VETERANS

The plight of the homeless woman veteran is one that is only recently being addressed by the VA in any specific fashion. VVA commends the VA for its FY2000 initiative for homeless women veterans, the first pilot program of its kind.

The pilot project program instituted with money in FY2000 will soon near the end of its initial completion date. The renewal of these programs is yet to be seen and of course we realize continuance is heavily weighted by program outcomes. If proven successful, we urge the VA, more specifically the VISN Directors, to continue funding and we further look for an increase in the number of these women veteran-specific, homeless programs.

The profound significance of these pilot programs, as seen in the lives of the homeless women who are participants, begs serious consideration. Because VA homeless domiciliaries are primarily utilized by male veterans, women find it difficult to acclimate themselves to the male-dominated residential structure, not only in light of their small representation in the population, but also because of past personal histories which include a significant occurrence of sexual abuse and trauma.

VA continues to state that it is difficult to justify specific women veteran domiciliaries or portions of domiciliaries because of the low utilization numbers of women veterans. In some instances, we feel this is another self-perpetuating situation; the women veterans do not come because there is no place for them and there is no place for them because they do not come. For this reason we place the utmost importance upon the evaluation of these ten (10) homeless women veteran programs. With so few VA homeless women residential programs, VVA feels there should be a stronger movement to establish a community-based partnership for the institution of a cooperative residential program for homeless women veterans. We feel the funding or contract arrangement for them should be considered outside the HGPS program. Community-based partnerships are especially vital when we consider the number of dependent of children who factor into this equation.

VA HOMELESS DOMICILIARY PROGRAMS

Domiciliary programs located within various medical centers throughout the VA system have proven costly. As stand-alone programs, many do not display a high rate of long-term success. Additionally, not all VISNs even have Homeless Domiciliary programs.

During this time of fiscal restraint, programs assisting homeless veterans need to show a cost/benefit ratio in order to survive. Due to the federal pay scales and other indirect cost factors, VA Homeless Domiciliary programs generally cost twice as much per homeless veteran participant (often over \$100 per day per veteran) as those programs of community-based organizations. If the operational cost of the VA Homeless Domiciliary program is to be justified, then an assurance of veteran success and a diminished rate of recidivism should be expected. This is not always the case and is especially true if the veteran has no linked transitional residential placement at discharge. A linkage with non-profit community programs will enhance outcomes in a cost-effective manner and openly speak to the belief in the "continuum of care" concept embraced by VA. HGPS has increased transitional placement possibilities in a number of areas, but more are desperately needed.

Where no VA Homeless Veteran Domiciliary exists, VVA urges the VA to contract with community-based programs for the management operation of homeless veteran residential programs. VVA further urges the VA to form an active linkage with community-based organizations for extended homeless veteran transitional services at the conclusion of VA Homeless Domiciliary care.

In closing, VVA recognizes the tremendous strides that have been made by Department of Veterans Affairs in addressing and providing services for homeless veterans. As with many profound problems, the road to solution and change is not without struggle. Much is left to be accomplished if we are to succeed in meeting the President's goal of ending chronic homelessness within 10 years. It is heartening to see the establishment of the VA's Homeless Veterans Advisory Committee. This action has given solid and substantial attention to the plight of veterans within the homeless population. This advisory committee will serve as a solid resource, providing recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. VVA looks forward to this advisory committee's first report and anticipate the response of the VA in regard to it.

In conclusion, VVA thanks the Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on Health for the attention it gives to the needs of all our veterans and for allowing us to enter this statement for the record

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
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The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans membership organization registered as a 501(c)(19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:
Director of Government Relations
Vietnam Veterans of America
(301) 585-4000 ext. 127

SANDRA A. MILLER

Sandra A. Miller currently serves as Chair of Vietnam Veterans of America Task Force on Homeless Veterans. She served as a Senior Enlisted Woman in the U.S. Navy from 1975 until 1981.

Ms. Miller currently works as the Program Coordinator at LZ II Transitional Residence, a 95-bed transitional facility for homeless veterans in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. LZ II Transitional Residence is a program of The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center, operating under a shared lease agreement with the Coatesville VA Medical Center. She is responsible for the overall day-to-day operations, seeing to the needs of homeless veterans in transition and overseeing all staff and program components. She has been a volunteer at Philadelphia Stand Down since 1995.

During Ms. Miller's military service, she received the National Defense Service Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, Navy Meritorious Unit Citation w/1 Bronze Device (2 awards), Zaire Airlift Letter of Commendation, U.S. Naval Forces Europe Letter of Appreciation, and numerous Command Petty Officer of the Quarter awards. Ms. Miller was awarded the AT&T Microelectronics National Volunteer of the Year in 1995 and the Lucent Technologies Humanitarian Service Award in 1996. She also received Vietnam Veterans of America, Region II James "Pop" Johnson Memorial Distinguished Service Award in 1998 and the Chapel of Four Chaplains, Legion of Honor Award, in September 2000 for her work with homeless veterans.

She currently resides in Douglassville, Pennsylvania.